

JFK killing takes on life of its own

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Now we know who killed JFK.

It wasn't rogue elements of the CIA, angry right-wing Cubans, or capos in the Chicago mob.

It was the Cigarette-Smoking Man, the nameless, conspiratorial operative of *The X-Files*. He bumped off Kennedy at the behest of shadowy superiors in the U.S. military during last week's episode.

And Fox Television's spooky hit show isn't the only program to re-create the killing.

Once a subject almost too painful to mention, and later the focus of more-detached inquiries into grassy knolls and exit wounds, President John F. Kennedy's assassination has become the stuff of pop culture.

In one new collection of short stories, Kennedy isn't dead at all. He's alive and heading to the auction of Jackie's estate, determined to recover his Harvard-crest cuff links. In comic books, an ethereal John Kennedy presides over the wasteland of a parallel universe, a job made all the more challenging by his grievous head injury.

"Alternative versions of the assassination are everywhere," said Alison Scott, head of the Pop Culture Library at Bowling Green State University in Ohio. "It's like Elvis."

On television shows such as NBC's *Dark Skies* and in venues such as the Internet, people are being offered substitute versions of that fateful 1963 motorcade through downtown Dallas. It's as if the word has gone forth to a new generation of TV writers and authors, declaring that the assassination is no longer taboo for them.

Scholars of American culture say the move toward the mainstream has been building for years. And they say that — aside from questions of taste — it's not inherently bad.

Making the assassination the focus of a TV drama doesn't mean Kennedy's death has become some distant historical event,

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as dated as pillbox hats. Rather, they say, it means that 33 years later, Americans are still trying to understand its implications. And they're doing it in ways that let them explore unusual explanations and outcomes.

"The moment of the Kennedy assassination has taken on the kind of mythic significance that breaks down the difference between fact and fiction," said Ralph Whitehead, a professor at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. "The 'whodunit' dimension of our treatment of the assassination is tapering off. The 'What-did-it-mean-for-me-and-the-country?' dimension remains very strong."

Kennedy died on Nov. 22, 1963, shot to death, the government declared, by a single gunman acting alone — Lee Harvey Oswald.

For much of the 1960s, JFK's assassination remained a raw, aching wound — an annihilation not just of the man but of a national sense of purpose and optimism. When it was discussed at all, the killing was treated in a documentary fashion, as ordinary people waited for officialdom and officialdom's leading skeptics to thrash out the facts.

By the late 1970s, with the healing fostered by time, people could examine the shooting as a murder case and search for answers about who was responsible.

They found nothing definitive. Now, scholars said, the narrative power of the event has begun to dominate, inviting a more mythologized handling.

In the *X-Files* re-creation, the assassination is carried out by the mysterious Cigarette-Smoking Man, who has long thwarted FBI investigations by agents Fox Mulder and Dana Scully.

Sunday, November 24, 1996

Flashbacks showed the assassin as a young Army captain who, after being interrupted while reading *The Manchurian Candidate*, accepts his superiors' proposal to kill Kennedy. Oswald is framed, depicted as what he claimed to be in real life — a patsy.

Among the new written treatments of the assassination is a fictional story by Pulitzer Prize-winning author Robert Olen Butler titled "JFK Secretly Attends Jackie Auction."

In this version, presented in Butler's book *Tabloid Dreams*, JFK survived the shooting with reason and memory intact. But gone is his ability to hold his tongue. The CIA, fearful that the president would spout state secrets to whomever he met, has confined him at a secret compound in Virginia since 1963.

This Kennedy has grown old, watching the violence that nearly took his life claim that of his brother and his contemporaries. "I will always remember where I was on the day Martin was shot," Kennedy says, referring to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Kennedy, alone and desperate for the touch of strangers who once so eagerly sought his hand, is granted one day of freedom to attend the Sotheby's auction of his late wife's possessions. But the \$4,000 he has scraped together is too little to buy even a tie clasp.

"These treatments are not really about the assassination per se, the assassination as an event," said Whitehead, a journalism professor. "The subject is our continuing psychological engagement in the event."

To be sure, these are not the first popular

The killing is fascinating a new crop of writers. The event, with some new twists, is finding its way onto TV, the Net and other media.

works to touch on the murder. Oliver Stone's 1991 movie, *JFK*, imagined that the CIA, FBI, Secret Service, Dallas Police Department and numerous other agencies conspired to kill the president and cover it up. In the 1993 film *In the Line of Fire*, Clint Eastwood portrayed a Secret Service agent haunted by his failure that day in Dallas.

Thousands of assassination Web sites exist on the Internet. And in Dallas, a new attraction lets tourists ride in an open limousine as it rolls through Dealey Plaza — a death tour complete with the recorded crack of rifle fire as the car passes the Texas School Book Depository.

It was from that building, the Warren Commission concluded in 1964, that Oswald shot America's popular young president. When Jack Ruby shot Oswald to death in the basement of the Dallas jail two days later, he sparked an enduring public suspicion of conspiracy.

A 1979 government investigation found evidence of a second gunman. But no one has definitive answers. And that has led people to search elsewhere, in places such as *The X-Files*.

"People need some kind of venue to retell history, to play with some of its unresolved threads," said Barbie Zelizer, an associate professor at Temple University. "And they're willing to go to great lengths in pop culture to do it."

Zelizer, the author of *Covering the Body: The Kennedy Assassination, the Media and the Shaping of Collective Memory*, expects the story to be told far into the future, in different ways and different forms, with many different outcomes.

"Why wouldn't it be told? That's more the question," Zelizer said. "People are looking for other explanations."